

“A Very Personal Invitation”

Dr. D. Jay Losher

3 June 2018 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church

I Samuel 3:1-10 + Mark 1:14-20 = God's call

Have you ever noticed anonymous notes never bring good news? I had just started as an interim pastor at Preston Hollow PC in Dallas. I was in my second week when I found an anonymous note on my desk which read: “Gee, I expect you would call me by name now.” Wow, is that a realistic expectation that in a 2800 member church and after only one Sunday receiving line, a pastor would know everyone's name.



Yet we learn from this that everyone wants a personal invitation, especially from their religious leader. It is a fair expectation to be called by name by another, by our personal name, a basic courtesy.

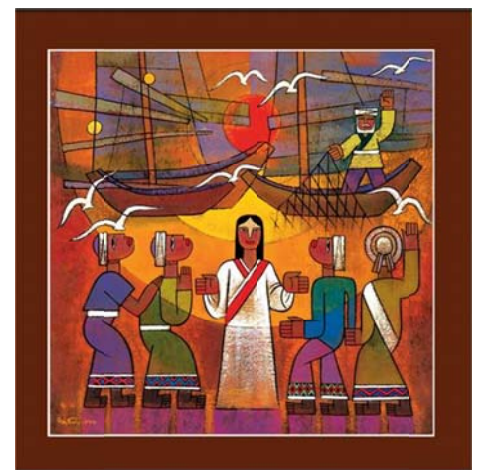
It is also a fair and reasonable expectation for God to call us by name. In the Book of Revelation: Jesus says:

“I will give [you] a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.”¹

A most personal of names, our God-given name, our real name: God is the only one who can truly call us by name.

Our two texts today detail God calling Samuel by name, and Jesus calling Peter, Andrew, James and John as well to be transformed from fisherfolk to fishers of people. Each was called by name with a very personal invitation from God.

With the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John we see some of the dimensions of God's call. Jesus calls disciples away from business as usual to a new life and ministry. Discipleship involves a choice. We must “decide to follow Jesus.” It's so much more than just the click of a mouse in order to “follow” on Facebook. Jesus gives us our marching orders:



“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”²

A disciple more than merely believes in the good news. A disciple commits to repent, and commits to expend our strength in something greater ~ to live in God’s realm breaking through, to become a partner in God’s plan, to share in God’s kinship community.



Beyond choice and commitment, the disciples were called to “fish for people,” to share the Good News with others, to engage others in God’s grand enterprise, to make God’s kingdom real. All implicit in God’s call.

The call of Samuel: The classic symptom of schizophrenia is hearing voices. Here we have Samuel hearing voices. Is it the real voice of God or merely a chemical imbalance in the brain? How do we tell if the voice we hear is God’s voice or merely our own imaginary wish fulfillment?



The short answer is that God always calls us by name, by our secret name, the name only God and we ourselves recognize. The long answer lifts up important aspects of God’s call of Samuel which verify it is God speaking and not just a fantasy on our part.

First, Samuel does not recognize the voice as God’s. Samuel thinks it is Eli’s voice, and goes to wake him up 3 times. If it were a voice manufactured by Samuel’s active imagination, undoubtedly his mind would convince him the voice he hears is God’s.



Only on Eli’s insistence does Samuel respond to God. But God doesn’t give the message to Eli to tell Samuel. Eli sends Samuel back to listen to God directly. This is important. Don’t listen to so-called ministers or prophets who say God told them to tell you to give them money ~ whether that money is for a brand new private jet or even a worthy cause like a hospital or mission. Rather the proper role for a modern priest, minister or prophet is instead to

charge their flocks to listen directly to God not to the messengers themselves. Beware those who claim to speak for God.

Second, since it says **“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread,”**³ then it is no surprise that Samuel doesn’t realize the voice as God’s. The same can be said for us as well, since God’s direct conversing is also extremely rare in our own era.

Third, Samuel is sleeping by the Ark of the Covenant, the repository of the sacred relics, the tablets of the law. The ark is God’s portable throne. Samuel sleeps in sacred space. God’s message doesn’t come to someone outside the covenant. It comes to someone in direct contact with God. Thus it is better for us to seek God’s discernment directly rather than to look outside the congregation to some guru or consultant or to imitate something some other congregation is doing.



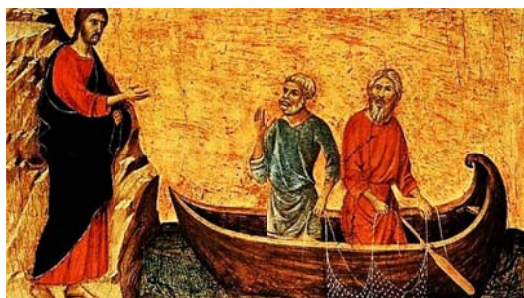
Additionally, God gives the message to a person at the very bottom of the social order, bypassing royals and priestly hierarchies. God did the same with Abraham and Sarah, and Mary and Joseph, and Israel down in Egypt land.

Don’t look for God’s voice to come thru the rich and famous, celebrities and politicians, even national leaders, even national religious leaders. However rare in our current era, look for the voice of God to come to the most ordinary of folks, the marginalized and the vulnerable.

The big takeaway from Samuel’s call from God is that of the many invitations we receive, like the spam we all get on our phones and computers: for credit cards, to buy this, to sell that, playing on our imaginations and desires, our avarice and ego, solicitations of all kinds. All, every one of them, even some of the solicitations which seem so spiritual, are not from God.



God’s invitation could come anytime. It came at midday to the first four disciples while they were minding their own business. Samuel’s call came at night when he was in the physical presence of God. We have no ark,



but we do bring ourselves into God's presence in a variety of ways, not the least of which is when we open ourselves to God in prayer.



Step 1: **Pray.**

Step 2: **Listen** ~ listen very carefully. As instructed Samuel opened himself to God: **“Speak, for your servant is listening.”**⁴

Step 3: **Discern.** God's voice comes with an accent different from our own ~ with unmistakable authority and authenticity ~ and with a mysterious quality, none of which we can manufacture for ourselves. Like a bush burning but never consumed, the call of Yahweh always is unfamiliar, and ever after will remain unique.

Unfortunately, many cannot discern God's voice from the voice of their own ambition, avarice and ego. How do we tell the difference between what “I want” and what God wants. Well, Jesus told us what God wants:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”⁵

Step 4: **Choose:** Make the choice. Decide to follow Jesus. Decide to side with God's kingdom rather than the kingdoms of the world. Repent.

Step 5: **Commit:** to “fish for people,” to share the Good News, to make God's kingdom real.

I once saw an interview with Jack Elam the actor while on the set of *Rio Bravo*. What he outlined were the five stages of an actors life.

1. “Jack Elam, who?”
2. “We need a Charlton Heston or Humphrey Bogart, but we cannot afford them. Who is this Jack Elam? He works cheap?”
3. “We need Jack Elam.”
4. “We need Jack Elam, only younger.”
- 5th and final stage: “Jack Elam, who?”





Thank our loving God, we are forever at Stage 3: “I need you (and God calls you by name).” Ever notice you can tell a telemarketer call by the fact that they can’t say your name right. With God’s call, God always pronounces our name right, always calls us personally by name, by our real name.

A very personal invitation.

¹ Revelation 2:17

² Mark 1:14

³ I Samuel 3:1

⁴ I Samuel 3:10

⁵ Mark 1:14